

Lithuania— So Gallant, So Embarrassing

The voice of conscience was soft but firm. "Even the world's darling does not have the monopolistic right to decide the fate of other nations," said the Lithuanian prime minister, reading from her handwritten notes. The congressmen grinned at that crack about Mikhail Gorbachev.

There she went again, Kazimiera Prunskiene, making herself a most inconvenient person. Here she is, with that wide smile, saying things few really want to hear. A city convinced of Mr. Gorbachev's unerring judgment is getting a second opinion. An administration hoping for a cosy summit May 30 suddenly must confront 40 years of Republican "Captive Nations" rhetoric. Wouldn't you know, this 47-year-old former economist shows up as the needy but unwanted relative, a twinge of conscience amid cold-blooded calculations of national interest.

A back-seat conversation driving through town reveals something more: She feels she's a cold-blooded realist too. "I want to emphasize the mistake Western countries make when they talk about the threat to Gorbachev," she says, her voice tensing as if this is her main point. "They don't recognize that the pressure being imposed on Gorbachev is coming from two different directions."

The forces of old reaction are contending with newer "democratic forces" that want radical reform and are growing in

Potomac Watch

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strength. Mr. Gorbachev has walked a delicate line between them, she says, but sooner or later he must choose. By squeezing Lithuania, Mr. Gorbachev sides with the reactionaries. But the democrats all across the Soviet "empire" support Lithuanian self-determination. "The democratic forces understand that the question of whether we have a democratic Soviet Union, a democratic Russia, is being decided today in Lithuania," she says.

What about George Bush's fear of a military coup? Pressure from the West regarding Lithuania actually helps, rather than hinders, Mr. Gorbachev's reform efforts, the prime minister explains. If he sides with the democrats, he will become stronger and have more allies to fight off the reaction. Besides, she adds, he's firmly in control of both the military and KGB.

Lithuanians are willing to compromise, but only Western pressure will ensure that Mr. Gorbachev also bargains in good faith. She isn't asking for much nor talking about "Munich." What she wants are "international guarantees" to mediate the dispute and perhaps some help to "neutralize" the Soviet embargo.

Her principal target, George Bush, at least avoided Gerald Ford's Solzhenitsyn mistake. President Ford's refusal to entertain the storied Russian dissident became a metaphor for the obsequious detente of the 1970s.

Not that Mr. Bush or his aides had sought Mrs. Prunskiene's company. They'd hoped she'd have the good taste to wait until after the Bush-Gorbachev summit (and week-long photo-op). Lithuanian sources say her first response from the State Department in Moscow was to wait until June. Only after that story leaked did State find a visa, they say.

And only after criticism from senators did the White House join the publicity queue. Joseph Kazickas, a Lithuanian-American who arranged her visit here, got his first White House call Monday afternoon. Hand-wringing National Security Council staffers had known she was coming for days. (Spokesman Marlin Fitzwater says the White House received its first formal request Monday and assented the next day.) As a mere "private" visitor, Mrs. Prunskiene was also denied any U.S. security or transport. Her entourage had to weave its own way through traffic in five \$45-an-hour rented sedans.

Mr. Bush did give Mrs. Prunskiene 45 minutes, even addressed her as "prime minister." Mr. Bush may refuse her request for formal recognition, but he is unfailingly cordial. If small captive nations were people, Mr. Bush would invite each one for dinner and a movie, and hope there'd be no hard feelings.

Congress embraced Mrs. Prunskiene more eagerly, though hardly with the acclaim accorded Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel. Perhaps it's part of Congress's psyche to prefer winners to long shots. Still, she had breakfast and lunch on the Hill, and spoke before the body's Helsinki human rights commission, framed by the American and the gold, green and red Lithuanian flags.

The only sour note came from Ed Markey, the Massachusetts liberal, who lectured her for having the gall to endanger the estimable Mr. Gorbachev. His performance had even senators rolling their eyes and Lithuanians in the audience applauding when Sen. James McClure, the Idaho Republican, begged to differ. Mr. Markey is the sort who's a moralist about all causes but the freedom of Balts or Russians; about that he's a realist manqué.

The Markey malarkey at least had the virtue of candor about Washington's probable intentions. No one wants to do very much to help Mrs. Prunskiene. Even Dante Fascell, the House Foreign Affairs Chairman who hosted breakfast for her, mostly spoke of the things the U.S. couldn't do to help—no economic sanctions, no oil or gas sealift during the Soviet embargo. His proposal to postpone the summit didn't fly with Mr. Bush. Mrs. Prunskiene's cause may be just, but what she wants is so very inconvenient.



Mrs. Prunskiene